

managers elsewhere in the *Handbook*.) Experienced agents and brokers with a thorough knowledge of business conditions and property values in their localities may enter mortgage financing or real estate investment counseling.

Job Outlook

Employment of real estate brokers and sales agents is expected to grow more slowly than the average for all occupations through the year 2010. However, a large number of job openings will arise each year from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force. Not everyone is successful in this highly competitive field; many beginners become discouraged by their inability to get listings and to close a sufficient number of sales. Well-trained, ambitious people who enjoy selling should have the best chance for success.

Increasing use of electronic information technology will continue to increase the productivity of agents and brokers, thus limiting job growth. Real estate companies use computer-generated images to show houses to customers without leaving the office. Internet sites contain information on vast numbers of homes for sale with maps and directions to find them, available to anyone. In addition, wireless products such as cellular phones and pagers that can send and receive large amounts of data allow agents and brokers to become more efficient and to serve a greater number of customers. Use of this technology may eliminate some marginal agents such as those practicing real estate part-time or between jobs. These workers will not be able to compete as easily with full-time agents who have invested in this technology. Changing legal requirements, like disclosure laws, may dissuade some who are not serious about practicing full time from continuing to work part time.

Another factor expected to adversely impact the need for agents and brokers is the ability of prospective customers to conduct their own searches for properties that meet their criteria by accessing real estate information on the Internet. While they are not able to conduct the entire real estate transaction online, it does allow the prospective buyer the convenience of making a more informed choice of properties to visit, as well as the ability to find out about financing, inspections, and appraisals.

Employment growth in this field will stem primarily from increased demand for home purchases and rental units. Shifts in the age distribution of the population over the next decade will result in a growing number of retirements and persons moving to smaller accommodations, often in quieter, smaller cities and towns or retirement communities. At the same time, younger families are expected to move out of apartments or smaller houses to larger accommodations.

Employment of real estate brokers and sales agents is very sensitive to swings in the economy. During periods of declining economic activity and tight credit, the volume of sales and the resulting demand for sales workers falls. During these periods, the earnings of agents and brokers decline, and many work fewer hours or leave the occupation altogether.

Earnings

The median annual earnings of salaried real estate agents, including commission, were \$27,640 in 2000. The middle 50 percent earned between \$19,530 and \$45,740 a year. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$14,460, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$78,540. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest number of salaried real estate agents in 2000 were as follows:

Residential building construction	\$44,940
Subdividers and developers	32,030
Real estate agents and managers	27,770
Real estate operators and lessors	20,770

Median annual earnings of salaried real estate brokers, including commission, were \$47,690 in 2000. The middle 50 percent earned between \$30,630 and \$80,250 a year. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$18,080, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$143,560 a year.

Commissions on sales are the main source of earnings of real estate agents and brokers. The rate of commission varies according to agent and broker agreement, the type of property, and its value. The percentage paid on the sale of farm and commercial properties or unimproved land usually is higher than the percentage paid for selling a home.

Commissions may be divided among several agents and brokers. The broker and the agent in the firm who obtained the listing usually share their commission when the property is sold; the broker and the agent in the firm who made the sale also usually share their part of the commission. Although an agent's share varies greatly from one firm to another, often it is about half of the total amount received by the firm. Agents who both list and sell a property maximize their commission.

Income usually increases as an agent gains experience, but individual ability, economic conditions, and the type and location of the property also affect earnings. Sales workers who are active in community organizations and local real estate associations can broaden their contacts and increase their earnings. A beginner's earnings often are irregular because a few weeks or even months may go by without a sale. Although some brokers allow an agent a drawing account against future earnings, this practice is not usual with new employees. The beginner, therefore, should have enough money to live on for about 6 months or until commissions increase.

Related Occupations

Selling expensive items such as homes requires maturity, tact, and a sense of responsibility. Other sales workers who find these character traits important in their work include insurance sales agents; retail salespersons; sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing; and securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents.

Sources of Additional Information

Information on license requirements for real estate brokers and sales agents is available from most local real estate organizations or from the State real estate commission or board.

For more information about opportunities in real estate, contact:
➤ National Association of Realtors, 700 11th St. NW., Washington, D.C. 20001. Internet: <http://www.nar.realtor.com>

Retail Salespersons

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Significant Points

- Good employment opportunities are expected due to the need to replace the large number of workers who leave the occupation each year.
- Many salespersons work evenings, weekends, and long hours from Thanksgiving through the beginning of January, during sales, and in other peak retail periods.
- Opportunities for part-time work are plentiful, attracting people looking to supplement their income; however, most of those selling high-priced items work full time and have substantial experience.

Nature of the Work

Whether selling shoes, computer equipment, or automobiles, retail salespersons assist customers in finding what they are looking for and try to interest them in buying the merchandise. They describe a product's features, demonstrate its use, or show various models and colors. For some sales jobs, particularly those involving expensive and complex items, retail salespersons need special knowledge or skills. For example, salespersons who sell automobiles must be able to explain to customers the features of various models, warranty information, the meaning of manufacturers' specifications, and the types of options and financing available.

Consumers spend millions of dollars every day on merchandise and often form their impressions of a store by evaluating its sales force. Therefore, retailers stress the importance of providing courteous and efficient service in order to remain competitive. When a customer wants an item that is not on the sales floor, for example, the salesperson may check the stockroom, place a special order, or call another store to locate the item.

In addition to selling, most retail salespersons, especially those who work in department and apparel stores, make out sales checks; receive cash, check, and charge payments; bag or package purchases; and give out change and receipts. Depending on the hours they work, retail salespersons may have to open or close cash registers. This may include counting the money; separating charge slips, coupons, and exchange vouchers; and making deposits at the cash office. Salespersons often are held responsible for the contents of their registers, and repeated shortages are cause for dismissal in many organizations. (Cashiers, who have similar job duties, are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Salespersons also may handle returns and exchanges of merchandise, wrap gifts, and keep their work areas neat. In addition, they may help stock shelves or racks, arrange for mailing or delivery of purchases, mark price tags, take inventory, and prepare displays.

Frequently, salespersons must be aware of special sales and promotions. They must also recognize possible security risks and thefts and know how to handle or prevent such situations.



A retail salesperson checks the availability of a product.

Working Conditions

Most salespersons in retail trade work in clean, comfortable, well-lighted stores. However, they often stand for long periods and may need supervisory approval to leave the sales floor.

The Monday-through-Friday, 9-to-5 workweek is the exception rather than the rule in retail trade. Most salespersons work evenings and weekends, particularly during sales and other peak retail periods. Because the holiday season is the busiest time for most retailers, many employers restrict the use of vacation time from Thanksgiving through the beginning of January.

This job can be rewarding for those who enjoy working with people. Patience and courtesy are required, especially when the work is repetitious and the customers are demanding.

Employment

Retail salespersons held about 4.1 million jobs in 2000. They worked in stores ranging from small specialty shops employing a few workers, to giant department stores with hundreds of salespersons. In addition, some were self-employed representatives of direct sales companies and mail-order houses. The largest employers of retail salespersons are department stores, clothing and accessories stores, furniture and home furnishing stores, and motor vehicle dealers.

This occupation offers many opportunities for part-time work and is especially appealing to students, retirees, and others looking to supplement their income. However, most of those selling "big-ticket" items, such as cars, jewelry, furniture, and electronic equipment, work full time and have substantial experience.

Because retail stores are found in every city and town, employment is distributed geographically in much the same way as the population.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

There usually are no formal education requirements for this type of work, although a high school diploma or equivalent is preferred. Employers look for people who enjoy working with others and have the tact and patience to deal with difficult customers. Among other desirable characteristics are an interest in sales work, a neat appearance, and the ability to communicate clearly and effectively. The ability to speak more than one language may be helpful for employment in communities where people from various cultures tend to live and shop. Before hiring a salesperson, some employers may conduct a background check, especially for a job selling high-priced items.

In most small stores, an experienced employee, or the proprietor, instructs newly hired sales personnel in making out sales checks and operating cash registers. In large stores, training programs are more formal and usually conducted over several days. Topics usually discussed are customer service, security, the store's policies and procedures, and how to work a cash register. Depending on the type of product they are selling, they may be given additional specialized training by manufacturers' representatives. For example, those working in cosmetics receive instruction on the types of products available and for whom the cosmetics would be most beneficial. Likewise, salespersons employed by motor vehicle dealers may be required to participate in training programs designed to provide information on the technical details of standard and optional equipment available on new models. Because providing the best service to customers is a high priority for many employers, employees often are given periodic training to update and refine their skills.

As salespersons gain experience and seniority, they usually move to positions of greater responsibility and may be given their choice of departments. This often means moving to areas with potentially higher earnings and commissions. The highest earnings potential usually is found in selling big-ticket items. This type of position

often requires the most knowledge of the product and the greatest talent for persuasion.

Opportunities for advancement vary in small stores. In some establishments, advancement is limited, because one person, often the owner, does most of the managerial work. In others, however, some salespersons are promoted to assistant managers.

Traditionally, capable salespersons without college degrees could advance to management positions. Today, however, large retail businesses usually prefer to hire college graduates as management trainees, making a college education increasingly important. Despite this trend, motivated and capable employees without college degrees still may advance to administrative or supervisory positions in large establishments.

Retail selling experience may be an asset when applying for sales positions with larger retailers or in other industries, such as financial services, wholesale trade, or manufacturing.

Job Outlook

As in the past, employment opportunities for retail salespersons are expected to be good because of the need to replace the large number of workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force each year. In addition, many new jobs will be created for retail salespersons. Employment is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through the year 2010, reflecting rising retail sales stemming from a growing population. Opportunities for part-time work should be abundant, and demand will be strong for temporary workers during peak selling periods, such as the end-of-year holiday season.

During economic downturns, sales volumes and the resulting demand for sales workers usually decline. Purchases of costly items, such as cars, appliances, and furniture, tend to be postponed during difficult economic times. In areas of high unemployment, sales of many types of goods decline. However, because turnover of sales workers usually is very high, employers often can adjust employment levels by simply not replacing all those who leave.

Earnings

The starting wage for many retail sales positions is the Federal minimum wage, which was \$5.15 an hour in 2001. In areas where employers have difficulty attracting and retaining workers, wages tend to be higher than the legislated minimum.

Median hourly earnings of retail salespersons, including commission, were \$8.02 in 2000. The middle 50 percent earned between \$6.63 and \$10.54 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$5.86, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$15.86 an hour. Median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of retail salespersons in 2000 were as follows:

New and used car dealers	\$17.81
Lumber and other building materials	10.38
Department stores	7.63
Miscellaneous shopping goods stores	7.50
Family clothing stores	7.39

Compensation systems vary by type of establishment and merchandise sold. Salespersons receive hourly wages, commissions, or a combination of wages and commissions. Under a commission system, salespersons receive a percentage of the sales that they make. This system offers sales workers the opportunity to significantly increase their earnings, but they may find that their earnings strongly depend on their ability to sell their product and on the ups and downs of the economy. Employers may use incentive programs such as awards, banquets, bonuses, and profit-sharing plans to promote teamwork among the sales staff.

Benefits may be limited in smaller stores, but benefits in large establishments usually are comparable to those offered by other employers. In addition, nearly all salespersons are able to buy their store's merchandise at a discount, with the savings depending upon the type of merchandise.

Related Occupations

Salespersons use sales techniques, coupled with their knowledge of merchandise, to assist customers and encourage purchases. Workers in a number of other occupations use these same skills, including sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing; securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents; counter and rental clerks; real estate brokers and sales agents; purchasing managers, buyers, and purchasing agents; insurance sales agents; sales engineers; and cashiers.

Sources of Additional Information

Information on careers in retail sales may be obtained from the personnel offices of local stores or from State merchants' associations.

General information about retailing is available from:
► National Retail Federation, 325 7th St. NW., Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20004. Internet: <http://www.nrf.com>

Information about retail sales employment opportunities is available from:

► Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union, 30 East 29th St., 4th Floor, New York, NY 10016.

Information about training for a career in automobile sales is available from:

► National Automobile Dealers Association, Public Relations Department, 8400 Westpark Dr., McLean, VA 22102-3591. Internet: <http://www.nada.org>

Sales Engineers

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Significant Points

- A bachelor's degree in engineering is required; many sales engineers have previous work experience in an engineering specialty.
- Projected employment growth stems from the increasing variety and number of goods to be sold.
- Employment opportunities and earnings may fluctuate from year to year.

Nature of the Work

Many products and services, especially those purchased by large companies and institutions, are highly complex. Sales engineers, using their engineering skills, help customers determine which products or services provided by the sales engineer's employer best suit their needs. Sales engineers—who also may be called manufacturers' agents, sales representatives, or technical sales support workers—often work with both the customer and the production, engineering, or research and development departments of their company or of independent firms to determine how products and services could be designed or modified to best suit the customer's needs. They also may advise the customer on how to best utilize the products or services being provided.

Selling, of course, is an important part of the job. Sales engineers use their technical skills to demonstrate to potential customers how and why the products or services they are selling would